

A visit with JR

During his long and successful career, Boise entrepreneur J.R. Simplot has invested in ventures ranging from agriculture to mining, land, and high technology, to name only a few.

But Mr. Simplot has been a major investor in education as well. In May, Boise State opened one of those investments . . . the Simplot/Micron Technology Center, a facility dedicated to the use of technology in the development and delivery of education.

Mr. Simplot and nine other donors provided all of the funds necessary for the construction and equipping of the building.

In this FOCUS interview, Mr. Simplot talks about America, education, and the new Technology Center.



By Mike Scheer

F: You are well known for your belief in America and its people. Why are you so bullish on America?

S: All you've got to do is open your eyes and see what we've done for people. We've got the envy of the world here in America, you know. Everybody wants what we've got. My idea is to keep this thing going up, instead of going down. And we can't compete with the world in a free market based on labor. There's no way we can do it. I think if we're smart enough — we have enough stuff to do it with — we can build a utopia here in America for many more millions of people. A real utopia!

And what do we all want? We want a better life! We've been able to give it to them. My old dad lived better than his old dad, that's damn sure, and I sure have done better than my old dad, and my kids, they're living better than I did! And that's what it is all about. It's a better life for our people.

I'm not concerned about the world. Naturally, we want to help them. Naturally, we want to do everything we can for our partners in democracy. But to go out and give them all of our jobs that we've worked for all our lives . . .

We've got a better America; we've got better roads; we got better everything! And I'm all for giving people more. That's the only thing that satisfies me. People have got to have more. You can't go backwards; we shouldn't go backwards. The tough work is all done. Nobody has to really get out and dig like I did . . . shovel those potatoes and carry those grain sacks. Today it's all automated. And we're going to automate these factories to where you're going to produce more and more by less and less work.

F: Do you think in America today there's still opportunity for people to pull themselves up by the bootstraps like you did?

S: Oh sure, sure. There is so much more opportunity here today and so many more things scientifically and electronically that we are just scratching the surface. You take these genes, for instance. What we are going to do with these damn things in the next 25 years is going to stagger your imagination. We're going to advance evolution in years where it took billions! We know we'll do it. And electronics . . . look at what we've done here right in Boise, Idaho. We've cut the size of those chips by three-fourths. Technology . . . a better way of doing things. How far can we go? I don't know.

F: Where do you think education fits into this equation?

S: You've got to be smart. People have got to take a leg of a leg of a leg and get good at it. They'll find a position because, you know, there's always a better way of doing things. I just don't want to see us have to go back to two dollars a day. We've got to innovate; we've got to eliminate as much labor out of everything as we can and make better pay for the people doing the work. Maybe they'll only have to work a couple days a week and get more time for their families, more time for living! And more time to educate themselves.

F: You are one of the leaders in the construction of the Simplot/Micron Technology Center. What was it about the project that interested you?

S: Well, you know it wasn't my idea. It was Ward Parkinson's. He told me how tough it was for him to get an education and how he had to work to get it. He said, "Jack, you can take electronics and someday you can educate people so much better and so much cheaper than we are doing today." And he told me about the building. He said if we get one here in town we'll attract the best young engineers and we'll benefit by it. And I said, "Get at it and see what the heck . . ." I didn't know whether he was going to build a room or a building. But he finally came up with this structure. I don't know what we put in it, but it was substantial. That's how we got the thing going.

F: What do you see as the potential of the building?

S: Take the finest professors in the world — you can sit in those auditoriums and they're on the screen and they can talk to five million kids instead of 125 or 150. That's my idea. And you can put it on tape; and can get it back; you can store it here at the college; or you can get it through a satellite. You can get it!

And I think someday you'll have this thing to where if America's smart, they'll develop a bank of knowledge that's second to nothing in the world. We've got it right today. Put it together so that people can get it with that little keyboard and they can hustle out any damn thing they want to hustle. Or you could correspond with Harvard, Yale, M.I.T., any of them. Get all their speeches and have a little shifting of cassettes. That's all you need. Electronics is getting so massive and so cheap, you know.

F: You sound bullish again. You're really talking about sharing education with . . .

S: The world! And every school district, from say the early grades on up. Say they've got their three R's and they're pretty sharp, why, start pushing them in these classes. If a student has it in him, he can get a computer or come to this school and work day and night until he gets to college.

F: During your lifetime, you've invested in many, many projects. Do you regard the donation for this building as an investment?

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S: Well, yes, not a direct investment to me, but to our company out there. I think we made an investment. I don't know what's available up there on those satellites and how expensive it is. But I can see the overall picture to where, good gosh, we'll educate at half, a third, a quarter, a fifth the cost. And you'll give them a better education. They'll see the best professors all over the world and they'll learn to dig it out themselves on this piece of machinery. They can get anything they want.

F: In your speech at the opening of the center you talked about how the U.S. should turn education into one of its leading exports.

S: If we've got the best bank of knowledge in the world and it's cheaper. If we're going to do it, we've got to compete with the world. We've got to have it worth the money or they're not going to buy it. We still educate a lot of people in the United States. But hell, with this they can come over here for one-tenth of the money, and have that privilege of getting all that knowledge, and dig it out themselves. Now that's what Ward says, a kid can go in there with the ambition and he can dig it out himself.

F: How can a university like Boise State help create more jobs? Is there a role you can see us playing in economic development?

S: Oh, sure, sure. You're on the right track with this new electronics. Let's see what we can do with it. I don't know what's out there. I'm just as dumb as an old farmer, you know. It's like they did with our program here; it was all over the United States. (Speaking of the national "Retrain America" teleconference broadcast May 23 to open the Simplot/Micron Technology Center.)

And I can see the same thing for every class from the first grade on up! One teacher might take care of five classes. When you get people educated to where they know they've got to be educated, and they want an education, then I think this thing will take hold and we'll see a big, big, big drive toward a cheaper, better educated person. And if we get it cheaper, we're going to have more of them. If we keep this bank of knowledge where people can get their hands on it, they're going to come to America because we're going to keep the last details right up to date.

F: There's an interesting story about how you were approached for the donation to build the center while you were on the golf course in McCall. Is that true?

S: Yeah, that's right, they did come up. It was either on the golf course or at my place, I don't remember. But that's about true. They just came up and I said I'll take 60 percent and you guys take 40 percent and we'll just build it.

F: Just like that!

S: Yeah.

F: How do you feel personally to have your name attached to a building like this, where you know it's going to last forever.

S: Oh golly, I can't tell. The future is not ours to see. I guess it will be there a long time. It's real and it's a good honest effort to try to do something. You know I've never been out for the publicity.